



33 DAYS : AN INTENSE MONTH OF HIGH-LEVEL DIPLOMACY

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IT WAS 33 days of high-powered diplomacy not seen before between Singapore and its two closest neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia. Barring any reversals, a new level of relationship will have been achieved, to the extent that the three countries will reaffirm their anchoring roles in an ASEAN that is searching for a better future.

The first significant development on 11 April, in my view, was unique. Singapore conferred an honorary doctorate on Sultan Iskandar Ismail of Johor, whose name now epitomises a new Malaysian growth zone bordering Singapore -- the Iskandar Development Region (IDR). Singapore's gesture, and Johor's response, were pregnant with symbolism. Given their long-standing interactions, there can be no harmonious relations between Singapore and Malaysia without excellent relations between Singapore and Johor, a key state in the Malaysian polity. And given Singapore's historical ties with Johor that even predate the coming of Raffles in 1819, there is no better way of emphasizing this relationship than such a politically symbolic gesture to the Johor royalty. Indeed, the conferment marked the end of Singapore's apprehension, though not dilemma, about taking up the invitation to participate in the IDR, a massive project that is a key part of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's imprint for Malaysia's future. How do you take part without being accused of taking advantage? How do you say no, if staying away is the wiser thing to do, without slighting your close neighbour? If you say yes, how do you balance potential competition with strategic partnership?

The Langkawi retreat

That symbolic act was followed by the retreat of May 14-15 between Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister Abdullah, a retreat which should go down in history as a major highlight of the two premiers' tenure. Helping to pave the way were assurances from Malaysian leaders that Singapore was not unwelcome. One particularly important gesture came from Johor's chief minister Abdul Ghani Othman, whose earlier scepticism of the Republic's role in Johor has transformed into a handshake, if not yet a hug. Singapore's chief critic when it comes to Mr Abdullah's plan with Singapore, was Mahathir Mohamad. The former premier's most recent bout of ill-health, ironically occurring at the same time as the Langkawi retreat, has had the effect of strengthening Abdullah's position and favouring his IDR agenda.

Despite the breakthrough that Langkawi represented, managing Singapore-Malaysia relations is still very much like walking through a path strewn with eggshells. Note how both PM Lee and PM Abdullah have to continue tip-toeing around fault lines and to assuage the critics. PM Lee was quick to correct himself over his use of the term "consultative" to describe the joint ministerial committee, lest it be misunderstood that Singapore wanted to interfere in what

clearly is a Malaysian project. Still, the Langkawi retreat was ground-breaking enough. It was the first for PM Lee and PM Abdullah since they became prime ministers within months of each other – Mr Abdullah in November 2003 and Mr Lee in August 2004. Their rise to the top had raised expectations of a new future in bilateral relations. Can Langkawi be the turning point that both sides badly need for their relations that have suffered many setbacks over the last decade or so?

The Indonesian front

The significance of the Langkawi retreat however goes beyond the bilateral. Indeed it should also be seen in conjunction with the positive turn in ties with Singapore's other key neighbour – Indonesia. This, at a time when latent bilateral tension was brewing and threatening to complicate Singapore's role as the incoming ASEAN chair.

Three weeks before the Langkawi summit, Singapore and Indonesia surprised everyone with what clearly was another leap in neighbourly relations. Both concluded an extradition treaty and a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA). The big news, as far as Indonesia is concerned, was Singapore's decision to finally agree on the extradition treaty. Jakarta has been pushing for this for decades, without success. The April 2007 signing of the treaty was a surprise because for a long time, it has been Singapore's position that an extradition treaty with Indonesia would be fraught with problems. To begin with, the laws of the two countries are drawn from different legal systems. But after September 11, an extradition treaty that cuts both ways must surely have its purpose. Besides, Singapore's long-held refusal has generated an image in the eyes of Indonesians of it being an uncooperative, if not self-centred, neighbour. This is an impression which Singapore has been working hard to overcome. There is also the perception in Jakarta that Singapore closes an eye to corrupt Indonesians "taking refuge" in the Republic -- a charge which Singapore has consistently denied.

The big story, really, is Singapore's changed position. What aided this was Indonesia's acceptance of the principle of a "balance of benefits" for both countries. The upshot was a package deal -- the treaty would be accompanied with the DCA. In the evening of April 23, a delegation of Indonesian ministers flew in to Singapore to wrap up the package. The manner in which the event took place was unprecedented, if not unusual. It is rare for a delegation of Indonesian ministers to come over to Singapore for formalities like this. Within the week, on April 27, in the idyllic setting of Bali, the two historic agreements were duly signed, witnessed by PM Lee and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. No doubt, there are hiccups in implementing the DCA. But the package deal approach means that Indonesia's interest in an extradition treaty should lead to a ratification of the DCA and its implementation agreement, despite the wariness displayed by Indonesian parliamentarians. But this does not nullify the fact that the stage has been set, hopefully, for a new phase in Singapore-Indonesian relations.

Binding Singapore's future with neighbours

One cannot help but be struck by the close sequence of events that unfolded between 11 April and 14-15 May, first with Malaysia and then with Indonesia. It may all well have been purely coincidental, of course. But the cumulative impact of 33 days of high-level diplomacy cannot be considered run-of-the-mill. It is not always that two major diplomatic initiatives with two key neighbours have taken place almost simultaneously. Perhaps what we are seeing at work is a new kind of diplomacy that has come to be associated with PM Lee, Singapore's third prime minister -- as first demonstrated by his post-tsunami initiative soon after becoming premier in 2004. This diplomacy seems to revolve around a sharper balance between Singapore's identity as a global city and its identity as a key part of Southeast Asia, between

its search for unfettered global space and its own sense of destiny with the region. While this balance has always been part of the Singapore identity, the increasingly hectic pace of globalization requires a stronger emphasis on the fact that Singapore is fundamentally still part and parcel of ASEAN -- even as it pushes ahead as a global city. This is the era in which Singapore wants to show that it feels and cares for its neighbours, because for better or worse, it belongs to the region. Friendship, not conflict, is the obvious option. This message has become critical at a time when Singapore is taking over the rotating chair of ASEAN this year -- at a time of high expectations for a new roadmap for ASEAN's next 40 years.

Like it or not, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are the core of ASEAN. The collective impact of periodic tensions between them generates an image of an unstable region. This drives away foreign investors badly needed to face the growing competition from a fast-rising China and India. An image of instability also reduces the economic space of everyone, Singapore included. It also serves the region well if each country is stable, secure and prosperous, led by leaders who believe in mutual accommodation and mutual respect. Both PM Abdullah and President Yudhoyono are facing key elections soon and cannot afford to see their hands weakened by bilateral issues. As host of the coming ASEAN summit, Singapore seems to be signaling that its neighbours' future, and ASEAN's future, are also very much its own.

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